# AFFINITY

## issue #3: mental health

This is the third issue of Affinity, an irregular zine providing space for critical reflection and analysis of strategies for resisting the dominant culture.

We want the words presented here to form part of a conversation, not a one-way communication, and therefore strongly encourage people to respond to what's written, or contribute articles of their own, which can be published in future issues.

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**1.**

I have suffered from some form of depression for as long as I can remember. In early childhood I clung to my mother and soon developed an unhealthy level of social anxiety. Whenever anyone I didn't recognise entered the room, or whenever my mother was out of sight, I would begin to cry and wail, overcome by feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. As I grew older, this desperate anxiousness settled into a crippling shyness and cautiousness in novel situations. The world seemed fraught with risks and potential hazards and pitfalls that could only be avoided by staying well within the bounds of what I considered a comfortable and safe environment. Whilst I would grow to hate the boredom and isolation that resulted from the cultivation of these kinds of characteristics, they would be far outweighed in my mind by the dangers that lay in crossing any kind of pre-established boundaries. A bearable course through life was one in which I remained unnoticed. This meant a strict adherence to the rules, laws and conventions imposed by the culture and society I was brought up in. The storms and turmoil that come with adolescence led to more withdrawal, increasing social anxiety and extremely low self-esteem.

Whilst my personality and circumstances have changed and developed, the patterns of emotional response and thought formed in these years have all stayed with me into adulthood. This has been complicated and augmented by an increasingly painful awareness of the devastating and violent

catastrophe of the society I inhabit, all of which seems to have rendered me particularly vulnerable to sustained depressive episodes.

For a long time I can remember feeling that my depression and withdrawal from society was down to a personal defect, a weakness in my personality and emotional make-up that rendered me unfit for normal society. In retrospect, I realise that depression, anxiety, withdrawal and mental instability were and are entirely reasonable and appropriate reactions to a sick society. After all, what does it mean to be well adjusted in such a fucked up world?

The dominant culture of advanced industrial capitalism provides fertile ground for the cultivation of mental instability. One of the most basic experiences of living in a society such as ours is the irreconcilable conflict between the force of our desires, our creative urges and free initiative, and the social conditions that constitute the prison we inhabit. Our entire economy runs off the energy of repressed desire. We are born into a society of strict control and restraint in which we must never digress from the dry and lifeless paths laid out for us by the state and capitalism if we want to survive. We are subject to incredible amounts of drudgery and misery as we are coerced into a system of institutional education, the main goal of which is to cultivate obedience. We live a numb existence achingly void of authentic or emotionally fulfilling experience. We feel desperately alone in a culture that breeds separation, isolation, and alienation to such an extent that

we can no longer rely on the support of those closest to us. Being born into an industrial society denies us the very possibility or opportunity to live in small, autonomous communities within which the individual is able to make meaningful decisions over the conditions and course of their life. Meaning, self-worth and agency become almost unattainable in a system of industrial capitalism that demands highly centralised organisation and coordination on a mass scale. We are constantly abused, attacked and polluted on psychological, physical, and emotional levels without any control or power to defend ourselves. Our most basic well-being lies in the hands of a small minority who make up the elite of our society, and thus our very existence feels fundamentally insecure. We witness the systematic destruction of the planet that sustains us, the unimaginable scale of oppression and suffering on which our society is based, and are powerless to do anything to stop it. The basic conditions of our social life breed discontent and dissatisfaction on such a massive scale that to remain psychologically and mentally robust in such conditions becomes incredibly difficult.

The creation of social conditions that produce alienation and depression is no accident. By rendering us isolated and depressed those who have had the most power to shape our society have attempted to nullify the opportunities for revolt. The potentially rebellious anger and frustration that might erupt from this situation is kept in check by the normalisation of dissatisfaction and discontent in our culture. The conflicts and tensions between our desires and a society of strict control are hidden beneath a veneer of social

respectability, absurd etiquette and an inauthentic culture in which the expression of genuine emotion is severely discouraged.

Without any obvious outlets, this suffocating claustrophobia produces acts of despair that are then categorised as arising from a disturbed or mentally unstable psyche. When I was a young teenager, during a lunch-break at school a boy in my class, without any immediate provocation, unwound a paper clip, put the two ends into a plug socket, held it with one hand and flicked the switch with the other. It caused a temporary short-circuit in our block and he sustained a fairly serious electric shock. I remember at the time conforming to how the incident was understood by everyone around me, that it was an irrational act by someone who had temporarily lost their grasp on normality. But looking back, I've wondered whether this was in fact a meaningful and in some sense rational, desperate attempt to escape. In an environment that was so void of authentic experiences or genuine emotional engagements, where everything was this dull façade of routines and alienated relationships, perhaps this was the manifestation of a desire for authentic experience, genuine feeling, or just to do something that broke the monotonous grey treadmill of everyday life.

For those who have successfully nurtured a desire to break through this suffocating veil of social harmony and to utilise their anger to try and take back control of their lives, susceptibility to depression is a major obstacle. The inability, no matter how hard you try, to find meaning or purpose in

anything inevitably breeds hopelessness. Your plans not only seem pointless and futile, but any attempts to make plans for the future become forever tempered by an acute awareness of your mental unpredictability. The once resolute desire to squat and stop living in rented accommodation becomes muddied and diluted by the recognition of your need for security and comfort in your home environment. Instead of opening up opportunities for collective action, meetings become something to survive, successful if you've managed to make it out the other side in one piece. The excitement you feel for a new project is quickly reeled in as you realise you can't make commitments beyond a week and can't guarantee to be able to fulfil the promises you've made. Your mental health then becomes yet another barrier in the fulfilment of your desires, and contributes to a harrowing tension between what you want to achieve and your ability to do so.

Depression, like many other aspects of mental health, remains highly stigmatised and misunderstood. It is only in the last few months that I have come to recognise what I've been experiencing as related to symptoms of depression. One of the reasons why it has taken me so long to develop an understanding of my own mental health is the culture of silence that surrounds these issues, a chronic avoidance and neglect that makes it extremely difficult to talk about openly and honestly. If you do express a desire to talk about it, more often than not you are siphoned off to 'specialists' (psychiatrists, counsellors, doctors), reinforcing the idea that this is not something to address or engage with in your everyday relationships. As a small gesture of resistance against this trend, I'd like to

use the remainder of the article to discuss the personal effects of depression, the specifics of how it has felt for me so that others, including and especially friends of mine, might better understand what can often appear so complex and murky.

When you perceive your external world as a terrible whirlwind of violence and oppression that you have no means of stopping, the loss of control over your own mind and emotions feels like the destruction of your last hope of sanctuary, a final terrifying invasion of the one place you thought you could retreat in safety. A dark storm cloud descends and engulfs you, and no matter how hard you might try you can't find a way out. It feels somehow external to you, but something you can't get out from under to see what it actually is. Everything you see and experience is coloured by this dark and brooding filter. No matter how much you recognise your thought patterns as negative and self-destructive, they seem to carry on their course independent of you, reducing you to a witness, helpless and tragic. Emotional responses have their roots in a dark and complex web that defies any attempt at understanding. You begin to get trapped in a downward spiral of triggers and sparks that you have no control over.

Low self-esteem is one of the most destructive and consistent contributors to this downward spiral. If left unchecked, it turns into a terrible self-perpetuating machine into which all other symptoms feed back and get reinforced. Loss of control over your emotions becomes a sign of weakness, just one of many personal defects. You become convinced your social

anxiety stems from a defunct personality, from being uninteresting, introvert, unattractive. This is why you're so alone. And you're jeopardising the relationships you do have by becoming a burden on those you love, because you're too weak to look after yourself. On top of all this, you're a shitty person because you're too self-absorbed and indulgent to even move beyond thinking about yourself to at least try and do something to resist the oppression you see around you. All these dark strands and negative thought patterns feed into one another to form a constant low whisper in your head that leaves you hating yourself. And once you start to think that you don't matter or have no worth, it becomes almost impossible to muster the energy or initiative to do the things to help you recover.

Depressive episodes inevitably have a significant and often destructive effect on your relationships. Intense social anxiety means that maintaining peripheral relationships becomes incredibly difficult, since being in social settings becomes claustrophobic and deeply upsetting to the point that you have to avoid them or risk triggering an even deeper and more profound depression. You feel cut off from the possibility of forming new relationships and meeting new people, with all the hope and excitement that comes with it. As for already existing close friendships, you feel constantly worried about becoming a burden on those you love, and your fear of upsetting them creates a strong temptation to be dishonest and conceal how you're really feeling.

All of these feelings combine to create an irresistible urge to withdraw from society. They form a tight knit web around your room that catches you every time you try to leave. You begin to live a disturbing paradox where isolation becomes both a sanctuary and a deep-seated fear. You hide from people because of your low self-esteem, social anxiety, and diminished energy, but soon start to dread the prospect of remaining alone. You realise how few close friends you have, and you begin to feel disconnected from those closest too you. You find yourself entering the dangerous waters of thinking that nobody would really notice if you weren't around.

Whilst caught in a depressive episode, everything loses any sense of meaning or purpose. The cliché of not being able to get yourself out of bed in the morning becomes a disturbing reality, as even basic everyday tasks seem futile and pointless. At its more extreme, this can manifest itself in physical symptoms of not only lethargy and tiredness, but also a kind of temporary paralysis. Seemingly unprovoked, your body gradually freezes until you can't move, as if someone had pulled the plug and drained all of the energy out of you. Everything stops, words won't form in your mouth, your breath becomes heavy, and for a few minutes at least you remain motionless.

Underlying all of these symptoms like a bed of nails is a crippling guilt. For me, this has been intimately linked with an acute awareness of my privileged life and background. I've often found myself extremely susceptible to the misguided notion that growing up in an advanced industrial society such as the UK, along with the material privilege that comes with being born high up within the hierarchy of that society, means that you have somehow escaped oppression. It's a short step from here to believing that you have no legitimate reason to feel depressed or low. You begin to feel that in some perverse way you are disrespecting the suffering of others in materially less privileged situations than yourself. This creates a highly destructive downward spiral in which your guilt feeds into your depression, and the more depressed you feel the guiltier you feel.

Keeping this spiral downwards in check is key to preventing depressive feelings from getting out of control. An important aspect of this is recognising your suffering as real and legitimate. Once you stop feeling guilty, you can begin to see your mental health as another battleground in a struggle against oppression.

## WHAT IS IT?

IT'S A DARK FUCKING CLOUD, GUSTY + BROODING + ALL -
ENGULFING. IT'S A RUSTY SPLUTTERING ENGINE THAT STUMBLES
TO A HALT AND AIN'T NO AMOUNT OF KICKSTARTING GONNA
MAKE THOSE COGS TURN. IT'S THE BOTTOM FALLING OUT. IT'S
THE WORN OUT FAILURE OF THAT DEEP-BURIED MECHANISM
THAT ~~KEEPS~~ THE "EVERYTHING-WILL-BE-OK" IMPULSE. IT'S A
    GENTLY FEEDS
TIRED, WEARY, SORROWFUL + GUILT-FILLED SURRENDER. IT'S
A BURNING SADNESS. IT'S A DOWNWARD SPIRAL AND A
COMPLEX MESS OF TRIGGERS + SPARKS + A LONG FUCKING
ROW OF FALLING DOMINOES THAT YOU CAN'T DO NOTHING
TO STOP 'COS YOU CAN NEVER CATCH UP. IT'S BLANK
EMPTY STARES AMIDST THE CONFUSION + POWERLESSNESS.
IT'S NOT HAVING A FUCKING CLUE WHAT TO DO. IT'S
LOTS OF WORRY. AND LOTS OF ANGER. IT'S THE HOPE
THAT YOU'D BEEN NURTURING AND QUIETLY RELYING ON
SPREADING IT'S DELICATE WINGS AND FLYING AWAY TO
ESCAPE THE STORMY WEATHER. IT'S A SMALL BEWILDERED
CHILD WHO STAYS FROZEN TO THE SPOT IN FEAR OF IT ALL.
IT'S CONTINUOUS SELF-DOUBT. IT'S ENDLESS TRAP-DOORS.
IT'S EVERYTHING CHANGING COLOUR TO DULL GREY + BLACK.
IT'S A LONG CHAIN AND A HEAVY FUCKING WEIGHT.

10

**2.**

Mental health is a complex issue that cannot be reduced to simple black-and-white terms. I argue though, that an important aspect of understanding and dealing with mental health is to acknowledge how much it can be shaped by our own internalising of society's norms and how others with those same internalised norms affect us. And how anarchism is able to shine a light on the path out of this mess.

There are so many different ways in which the issue of mental health can be approached, yet it remains such a difficult issue because it is so personal to us and society has become so confused in its relations to it.

I had never paid much attention to it until I developed a long term debilitating illness that affected my activism greatly. All of a sudden I had to be aware of the ebb and flow of my own mental state and how it affected me, how others affected me and how society shaped it. It was a sobering experience.

When I was growing up, mental health was a taboo subject except to be used as an insult. If someone went to Grancha or St. Dymphna's (Irish mental health hospitals) then it was seen with shame. As an activist, burn-out was acknowledged, but not understood. We lost people, it was sad, but we did not think any further about it, just let them disappear from our lives.

It is with gratefulness that I acknowledge the role that groups such as Activist Trauma have taken in highlighting the importance of the issue in activist circles and bringing about better understanding of people's needs. I think it is a mature and important development. I have seen far too many of my colleagues fall by the wayside over the years because of the lack of understanding of what was going on in their heads. And in the midst of the current police infiltrator hullabaloo, this increased understanding has been invaluable in helping people come to terms, in finding resources and in friends learning how to pull together.

I do not pretend that I understand mental health issues. What I write comes from my experience alone. I do not know how much it is built into our nature, whether some people are genetically more at risk, or how much it is a creation of social relations. Saying that, I believe as an anarchist it is an issue we need to grapple from various perspectives.

We do feel stress and strain in our every day lives; it is part of living, of having relations with the surrounding world, of having needs and desires that demand satisfying. When this becomes problematic is when these stresses threaten to overwhelm us, to damage our ability to work.

Capitalism affects us in two important ways. One, it creates entire new categories of stress and strain, especially thorough advertising that implants new requirements in order to be considered successful, new products that have to be acquired, new images of success and body that have to be attained, yet keeps them permanently shifting, ever out of reach. We look to

unforgiving companies for the answer, but their answer is more of the consumerism that contributed to the problem in the first place.

Two, it breaks down our communities, the very things that we depend on to check ourselves in every day life. It is communities that provide us with the achievable standards to measure ourselves by, but capitalism teases us away from them, atomises us even further. It leaves us more isolated and thus more susceptible to the pressures it wants to put on us, to turn us into good consumers. And without that support base we become ever more vulnerable, ever more open to having those stresses and strains put upon us.

If just from a mental health perspective, we have to destroy capitalism! Hurrah.

However, that is not the full story.

In the mental health issues that I've experienced, much of it comes down to feelings of safety and pressure. Safety in that we know we have support to throw a wobble every now and again. Pressure in that it is often what we believe others expect of us that causes us to place intolerable pressures on ourselves; we want to maintain a particular worldview of ourselves, or a position of status that requires sacrifices to sustain.

These beliefs are not constructed solely within ourselves; we are internalising the expectations and pressures of society around us. Often, the only way to counter it is seen as a complete rejection of that society, to

refuse all the norms being imposed on us outright. To rebel in every way or to withdraw totally. But this is just a cry for help in itself, and reflects the dominant paradigm of our times, the one that we barely recognise around us because it's so pervasive – that of liberty and individuality over all.

This seems to me as part of the problem. I am an anarchist, and that means that I do not simply care about my own liberty and freedoms; I have to also care about the communities I am involved in, I have to take responsibility for my actions and make an effort to be part of them. This is actually anarchists' abiding strength, the ability to merge both the individual and the community without alienating either.

By recognising our community, by opening up our individuality to its collective strength we gain so much more. We have been conditioned by capitalism and liberalism to do the opposite, but it is at our cost and the cost of our community. We all have a role to play in re-building the trust that is needed to make our communities work, and with it will come the ability to ease the pressure on our own mental health.

However, a word of caution. Mental health is an important part of being resilient in the face of capitalism's onslaught, but not all mental health is defined within us. To use the jargon of the moment, we live in a world of post-political governments, where the grand ideas have faded into squabbles over the centre ground and how best to direct the bureaucracy that has taken over so much of the real power.

More and more we are being encouraged into considering ourselves as a society of vulnerable people. It started off as a way of fighting political battles – avoiding the lack of substance in politics or the hegemonic dominance of liberalism in the media and parliament – but is developing into a tool of control. The personal is becoming the ground for political battles; we are told how to eat, how to exercise, how much to drink, how to be responsible and so on. This, I am sure, is all useful and well-intentioned advice, but its coming from distant institutions, governments telling us how to act and think, and in doing so, they are constantly re-enforcing the fact that we are all members of some vulnerable group or other. We are being encouraged to see ourselves as victims. We are being denied agency at the same time as we are being told we have more agency than ever before. Is it any wonder people constantly feel like they are going mad.…

Sometimes, what we really do not need is another pill or placebo to make us feel real and connected. In combating the issues around mental health, this is another set of false relationships that need to be demolished. It is one that anarchism helps with, because it allows us to challenge the relationships we have with society that are causing us so much unnecessary worry.

This is not to undermine the importance of mental health but to understand how it feels to me to be related to the world in which we currently live. Mental health does not exclusively exist independently of our society. As anarchists we should question those relationships as much as we question other forms of domination.

We all play a role, because, to a greater or lesser degree, we have all grown up in a society where the ideals of liberalism and capitalism have played a role in our development. In a million and one ways we replicate the patterns of domination, even in our own anarchist circles, continuing the pressures that put strain on people. If someone has to fight against patriarchal, dominating macho behaviour in an anarchist group, it is one more strain on them, and that is before they even get to fight against the bigger picture.

Yet, at the same time we have to be aware of people fighting against this, the loss of intimacy with family and friends who no longer share the same ideals, the constant barrage of information telling us to behave in a way that is not true to ourselves.

There is no simple answer. We have to muddle along, but greater awareness of mental health issues and the world in which they are created will go a long way for groups of us to find common solutions we can live with. Such processes will not be overturned in a generation, we simply have to prepare the way for the day that becomes possible. We have to accept it is a two pronged approach, and there are no easy answers; help each other to reject the behaviours of oppression forced on us while also learning to trust each other and be strong in ourselves. Part of it has to come from within us, requiring us to examine the origins of our fears, never an easy process. This is why we need the support of our community to help us break away from the years of indoctrination. We also have to learn to be aware of our own

roles in repeating the oppressions in all their forms, and that is another personal challenge for everyone who would define themselves as anarchists.

If we do not accept the issues of mental health, refuse to acknowledge the stresses of life and how they can originate in each other, then any future anarchist society will be little better than the one we have now. Simply that an issue may be uncomfortable is not a forgivable excuse.